The Need for Civility in American Life

Ronnie A. Yoder, June 6, 2012
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My comments are my own and not those of any other person, agency or organization.

In my commencement address at Goshen College in 2010 I noted that I often refer to myself as a Hindu Muslim Christian Jew—so I feel right at home here. As you know, the phrase was used by Gandhi to describe himself and refers to a symbolic identification with the good of all religions rather than claiming an intimate practice of them or the rejection of others. When Tibetan monks visited New York Avenue Presbyterian Church some years ago, I mentioned to them that I was a Hindu Moslem Christian Jew, and they knew immediately what I meant. I hope that you will too.

I am honored and humbled to address this remarkable organization on the subject of “The Need for Civility in American Life.” I trust you will not be surprised to hear that civility is far short of the goal we should seek in America and the world at large. So I will speak briefly on the subject of civility in the legal/judicial community, personal relations, politics, and finally in relations within and between cultures and religions—a subject considered in some depth in my commencement address and in the scholarship I began at Virginia Theological Seminary in 2007 to promote the study of love as an appropriate philosophical center for theology, life, preaching and practice in Christianity and all religions. First, a word about

Civility in the Law

In the law “civil” is the alternate to “criminal.” So, in civil law, rather than seeking to take someone’s life or freedom, being civil means that you merely seek to take their property or livelihood. Civil law is not necessarily civil. Small wonder that the Bible says don’t take your neighbor to court.

Adherence to ethical codes has long been a requirement for membership in the Bar; but calls for greater civility in the law have come as a more recent development. In 1992 the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals promulgated one of the first “Standards for Professional Conduct,” which go beyond other Codes of Conduct and call for civility between all participants in litigation. Soon thereafter bar associations promulgated their own civility codes, which are only aspirational, not requirements; but recent cases have nevertheless applied those standards in sanctioning incivility. Thus, the South Carolina Supreme Court recently upheld disciplinary action against an attorney for describing opposing parties as brainless, pigheaded pagans.

So, in the law, civility may be trending upwards. But seeking to enforce civility can be problematic. In Pennsylvania a state judge dismissed criminal charges against a Muslim for attacking a man who had shouted offensive statements about Islam while marching in a
Halloween parade. The judge said that the victim was “way outside [the] bounds of [his] first amendment rights.” The victim, an atheist, posted videotapes of the proceeding on the internet, claiming that the judge was a Muslim who kept a copy of the Quran on the bench. In response, the judge said he was a Lutheran and keeps a Quran and a Bible “out of respect to people of faiths other than Christianity”; but the judge received “hundreds of not-so-nice [internet] posts,” asserting that he was a Muslim “trying to introduce Sharia law” in Pennsylvania.

Still there is cause for hope in considering the future of civility in the law. We have had a Department of War or Defense (1949) since 1789; but in 1984 we established the first Institute of Peace as an official US agency, which provides seminars and conferences promoting peace and understanding throughout the world. Despite the continuing drumbeat for belt tightening, no one has yet managed to defund it. Those concerned about civility in the law or the world might consider a visit to its programs or its website (www.usip.gov).

Now a word about

Personal Civility

My wife and I celebrated 50 years of marriage on June 29 a year ago. When we said “I do,” we promised to stay together until death do us part, in good times and bad. We’ve had plenty of both, and, with each passing day, we realize that we are getting closer to the day that death may part us. So I try not to put off until tomorrow something I might do today, try to leave everything better than I find it, wake each day and start afresh, rejoicing to find that I’m still above ground, cover the cough, open the door, rise when ladies enter until you’re too old to rise, say “thank you”, “please,” remember that you can’t make me not love you and that there are some things you just don’t say to people you love. They may be true; but they shouldn’t be said.

Years ago I adopted the habit of thinking through everything I say three times before I say it. That may mean I am quiet while others are talking; but I also learned that, if you don’t say anything, people won’t learn how dumb you are. It’s certainly one good reason for not giving any more speeches than I must. It’s also harder to be uncivil while being quiet, although you can still be nasty by being passive aggressive.

Civility of course does not always extend to the road. Just remember that the road belongs to the driver in front of you and behind you . . . and you will better understand driving conduct. Civility in merging is always a pleasant surprise, so acknowledge the favor with a wave.

The electronic age has created a vast new arena where civility should, but often doesn’t reign. I tell my law clerks never to put anything in an email that they don’t want to see on the front page of the Washington Post; but I continue to receive emails from others that would have been better left unsent. It’s just too easy to hit “send” without sufficient considering or consideration; and those inconsiderate utterances are in writing and out there forever. So I
counsel friends and others to write it, rewrite it, and let it sit for a day before sending it, or better yet, . . . don’t.

Now a word about

**Political civility**

In case you haven’t noticed we’re in an election year, with a very confused, confusing, contentious, cantankerous contest to face a sitting president. Based on the evidence to date one might wonder whether there is any civility in politics. Judicial applicants are Borked. DC council members swear at each other. At the end of the day the electorate decides how much civility they want in politics by electing those who either are or are not civil. Civility is desirable; but electability is the test of whether it’s valued or necessary. How many of you have received a survey on whether you would support the candidate with the most civility versus the one with the best economic, social, or tax program?

So we need civility in the law, in human relations, and in politics in America and throughout the world. But civility is far too weak a word. Civility is something you do for someone you don’t care about, but tolerate—not a member of the family of which we are all a part. Tolerance is not enough. Civility is something on the lips; what’s needed is something in the heart. Not just speech; but a new birth of caring for all of our neighbors. Incivility is not a disease; it’s a symptom. It’s not a cause but a product of a faulty philosophical center. So, a word about civility within and between cultures and religions.

**Cultural and Religious Civility**

Religions recognize the need for civility. The Golden Rule is a fundamental tenet of nearly every world religion. But are we willing to test our creeds and doctrines and ethics by that rule? Can we expect civility in law and politics, if we cannot find it within and between religions?

Some years ago I was asked by one of my darker brothers to speak at his installation as a pastor—in a cavernous ballroom in a downtown hotel where I was a lone light face in a sea of 500 darker brothers. So I introduced myself: “I’m Ron Yoder; and I’m black”—a simple statement that brought down the house. You probably didn’t notice that I’m black, because I’m light-skinned. I often describe myself as light-skinned to emphasize the unity of the whole human family, since both anthropology and the scriptures affirm that we are all descended from a single ancestor. Science now attests that a small black lady in Africa was our common grandmother 100,000 years ago. However you figure it, we are all black. It’s just that some are blacker than others. We are all cousins; it’s just that some are closer than others. So we must find ways to bring our family together and be civil.

I have four children and ten grandchildren — one Chinese, three Chinese-American, one Japanese-American, two English-American, one Austrian-American and three American-American. So I’m a Chinese grandfather, a Japanese grandfather, an English grandfather and an American grandfather. We’re bringing the world together.

3
The world is coming together. The world’s religions are coming together. They say that Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week. On Sunday, I attend as many as four churches in order to bring our family together and spread the news that we are one family of whatever race, color or creed. Presently, my churches are Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Unity. Two of those churches are predominantly black; two are “open and affirming.” I don’t see many other regular visitors. You could help by encouraging your members to undertake such visitations. Dare to risk your own in pursuit of civility in the human family.

In “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” Sidney Poitier’s character wants to marry a white girl, and tells his objecting father: “You’re my father and I love you; but you think of yourself as a colored man. I think of myself as a man.” We are on the verge of a similar revelation or revolution in social and religious thinking. Recently multiracial Americans numbered 7 percent of all married couples, up from 2 percent in 1970—up 350% in 35 years. At that rate multiracial couples would be 24% in 35 years and 84% in 70 years. A similar phenomenon is occurring in the world’s religions. Between 1996 and 2001, nearly half of the Jewish marriages in the United States were intermarriages with non-Jewish partners.

Although my father grew up as a Mennonite and went on to become active in the Methodist church, I have attended Catholic and most Protestant churches and several synagogues, and in the course of my life, I have come to understand and embrace Gandhi’s affirmation of himself as a Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jew. Since I view my life and self-understanding through the eyes of Christian symbols, I sometimes describe myself as a Christian Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jew.

I might say to my father: “You think of yourself as a Christian, I think of myself as a Hindu Moslem Christian Jew.” To my spiritual father at the center of my self-understanding I might say: “I approach you through Christian symbols, because I know them best; but I know that you are a God of Love who may be found in all religions—in all of life—and that you are available to infuse that love and reform each tradition to create a new Kingdom—where a God of Love is acknowledged by all as the center of their religious understanding.

In 1432 Galileo published his conclusion that the Earth was not the center of the universe with the sun revolving around it. He was convicted of heresy and spent the rest of his life under house arrest. Nearly 400 years later in 1822 the ban on his book [Dialogue] was lifted; and now we face the scientific suggestion of a multiverse with an infinite number of universes, where we are not only members of the same human family; in some universe somewhere we actually are each other. Somewhere in that far off universe you are not only your brother’s keeper—you are your brother or sister. Here you are rich; there you are poor. Here you are male; there you are female. How would you want to be treated as status and gender opposites? Here you are Protestant; there you are Catholic. Here you are Hindu; there you are Muslim, or vice versa. What kind of Protestant or Catholic or Hindu or Muslim would
you want your brother religionist to be in that far off world? What philosophical center would you want them to affirm? In an infinite number of universes, we all walk in each other’s shoes. And even if it weren’t true, maybe we should live as if it were. That’s civility. Do we need civility? Yes. But we need a lot more.

Two thousand years ago a visionary proclaimed a new Kingdom open to all people who embrace the God of Love he saw as Father. Jesus said to love the children of the world — not black children or white children, or Christian or non-Christian children. He did not say love as the scribes and Pharisees — the people of the church. He said love as the enemy with a different religion — the Samaritan who loved his neighbor. Jesus talked to the Samaritan woman at the well, dealt with Samaritan lepers, ate with tax collectors. He barred no one from his communion table. He grew up and lived as a Jew; but the heroes in his parables were Samaritans. He never created creedal walls between himself and all the people he invited to share in a Kingdom of Love — where a God of Love was available to all. His father might say: “You are my people; but you see yourselves as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Can’t you get together—in substance if not in form?”

Jesus, of course, was not a Christian. He was a Jew, but his Jewishness did not prevent his examination of the orthodox tenets of his faith in the light of his vision of a Kingdom where the God of Love that he called Father was large enough to include everyone, especially those outside the “church” of his day. The existence of this organization offers a picture of the inclusiveness of the Kingdom he envisioned. I am not an expert on any of the religions represented here or the verities they profess; but our better angels urge us all to find the central verities that lead us toward the recognition of one human family joined in faith and committed to a unifying philosophical center seen through the verities of each tradition.

The introduction to my scholarship at Virginia Theological Seminary observed that:

“Christians readily identify God’s nature as love, [but] Christianity has not always placed love in the center of its theology, nor acted like a community of love. Like other religions in the world, Christianity has been the source of conflict and rancor, as well as peace and sacrificial love. . . . The Yoder Scholarship invites students to submit papers, poems, or songs on whether] a God of Love . . . [is] an appropriate philosophical center for [Christianity and] all the world’s religions and peoples.”

Love has become a cliché in some quarters. Candidates love electorates. Subarus are made with love. Virginia is for lovers. But love is neither soft nor easy. Ask Jesus, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa. Consider the Philippine independence marchers, the Amish response to the murder of school children, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s conclusion that his God of Love required him to kill Hitler.

As a member of the laity I cannot preach; but to the extent that these comments are preachy, I dearly hope that I am preaching to the choir, where the unity of the human family, its care and feeding, physically and spiritually, are paramount, and where commitment to love is a central motivating philosophy which informs and tests the propriety of our symbols and
creeds. Collectively, we should be able to affirm that there is one human family—whether we seek it through the Hebrew Bible, Christian Bible, Quran, or other holy books or secular writings. Is it possible for humankind to recognize a common philosophical center and the functional validity of competing ideologies and philosophies without surrendering to relativism? I hope so; and I hope it will lead to greater understanding and civility.

Let me close this ode to civility with the last verse of my song “Ode to Hope,” which I wrote after the trauma of 9/11: “Then who is our neighbor deserving our favor? The God of Love calls us to love all mankind. For God loves all creatures; that’s what scripture teaches. And all true religion embraces God’s love. We all are his people, in mosque, temple, and steeple. We’re Hindu and Muslim and Christian and Jew. With love at our center, the Kingdom we enter — with love at our center, the hope of the world.”

That’s civility. Amen.